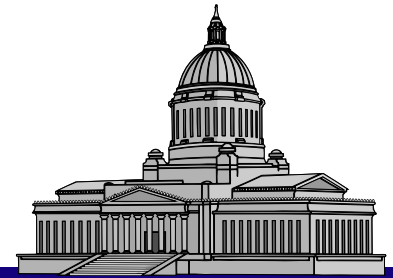


Rep. Jeff Gombosky



3rd District Issue Update

Dear Neighbors:

The 1998 Washington state legislative session began in January and will conclude in March. Because the session is only two months long, I want to provide you with the analysis of some of the issues I'll be working on in Olympia this year. It's an honor and privilege to serve as your representative in our state capitol. Please don't hesitate to contact me at the numbers listed below if there are legislative matters that concern you.

My priorities for this year are based on the conversations that I have had with the citizens of Spokane over the past year. The expression I hear most often from friends and neighbors is that government tends to favor the concerns of wealthy special interests over the challenges faced by everyday people who work hard and play by the rules. Too often this is true.

My hope is that we can begin to initiate reforms that will help state government to regain its focus. Our priorities should center on the values and interests of Washington's middle class families. We need to clean up the system and make it work for everyday people.

Specifically, we should:

- *Reform our state's campaign finance laws*
- *Advance proposals to give citizens a greater voice in their government*
- *Ensure that tax relief is targeted to middle class people rather than special interest groups*
- *Expand access to affordable high quality child care*
- *Raise the state's minimum wage*

I would like to hear your thoughts on these and other issues that affect our community. My office number in Olympia is (360) 786-7946. You can also call the toll-free Legislative Hotline at 1-800-562-6000.

Again, thank you for the honor of serving as one of your representatives in the Legislature.

Sincerely,

Jeff Gombosky



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Committee Assignments:

Appropriations

assistant ranking minority member

Children and Family Services



Clean up the System

The recent federal hearings on campaign finance reform highlighted many problems with our system. Campaign costs have reached astronomical proportions. Much of that money is not being fully disclosed by candidates, those who raise the most money win virtually every election.

Washington state is not immune to these problems: despite the passage of Initiative 134 in 1992, more money is being spent than ever before on running for office in Washington. Our election laws place limits on the amount of money a person, PAC (Political Action Committee), union, business or other special interests can give to a particular candidate.

Yet there's no limit to these groups ability to independently spend money to assist particular candidates. This loophole is referred to as an 'independent expenditure' campaign. Any group can spend an unlimited amount of money attempting to influence an election without the knowledge of the candidates. This ensures an unaccountable flow of money from special interests into campaigns for public office. And these types of expenditures have been used for inflammatory negative attacks. While there are laws about how and when candidates can raise money there's no real control on what these independent groups can say or do.

Our current laws that govern campaign financing need a dramatic overhaul. In 1978, a total of \$2.8 million was spent on legislative campaigns. By 1992, spending on state elections totaled \$13.5 million. The average winning candidate in 1994 spent \$51,340 to win a seat in the Legislature that pays \$28,300 a year.

While campaign finance reform is often portrayed as a complicated topic, there are a number of common sense ways to clean up campaigns. First, simplify the rules about raising money and disclosing to the public how money is raised.

Second, tighten the laws that govern the conduct and disclosure of independent expenditures. And third, create a commission of citizens that can review our campaign finance system and make recommendations about future changes.

Special Interests vs. Everyday Citizens

Special interest groups spent \$14 million lobbying the Legislature in 1997. A study by the Seattle Post-Intelligencer found that of the ten biggest-spending special interest groups, five accomplished all of the changes to state law they sought, three won partial victories and only two came away without winning big concessions from the Legislature. When this happens typically it is at the expense of common citizens.

Everyday citizens received only 20 percent of the \$1.4 (b) billion in tax breaks granted in the last three years. Special interest groups spent \$42 million over three years and received over \$1.1 billion in tax reductions. It's the equivalent of investing \$100 and reaping a dividend of \$2,666. It becomes no mystery why citizens and small businesses are shouldering more and more of the tax burden.

Because of the large revenue surplus at the start of the 1997 Legislative session, many special interest groups came to Olympia looking for a tax break or financing for a special project. Two examples from last year highlight the power of special interest groups to get what they want. The building of a new stadium for the Seattle Seahawks — owned by the sixth wealthiest person in the world. And a new law that requires taxpayers to bailout bankrupt insurance companies. When I have spoken with citizens in Spokane about this issue, most people ask "Isn't there a way to refund money directly to the people when the state has surplus revenue." This idea has led to the proposal called 'Just Write the Check.'



Just Write the Check

Many of you have heard that in Alaska, Oregon, and Colorado, residents receive a rebate from their state after the basic services of government have been paid for. Our state is expected to have a nearly \$900 million surplus at the end of this 1997-99 budget cycle.

The state has granted \$1.4 billion in tax cuts from 1995 through 1999, but common citizens won't receive much tax relief. In fact, 80 percent of the tax cuts are going to special interests, with just 20 percent going to the everyday taxpayers.

Just Write the Check is a simple, equal and fair way to provide tax relief when the state has a large surplus. Every man, woman and child would get a check for \$70 from the state, for example, if we wanted to give \$400 million in tax relief.

Now, those opposed to giving the money to common citizens rather than special interests say that tax reductions should be permanent rather than a one-time rebate. However, rebates such as ***Just Write the Check*** are more fiscally prudent since tax relief can be granted to citizens during economic boom times, but the state won't be impoverished and forced to raise taxes when the economy is struggling.

Voters affirmed this notion in 1993 when they rejected Initiative 602, which would have made similar tax reductions permanent. Considering that our state is dependent on international trade with Asia, which is in economic turmoil, it makes sense to offer rebates during good times rather than lower taxes during prosperity and raise taxes during recessions.

Just Write the Check would also leave about \$500 million in the bank. That's equal to about five percent of annual state spending, and protects the revenue base for education funding.

Clean up the system



Make it work for everyday people

When I talk to my neighbors in Spokane, they tell me they're concerned about good jobs, safe streets, excellent schools, roads without potholes — the bread-and-butter basics of government. Far too often, the Legislature gets caught up in scoring political points by fighting about controversial social issues while ignoring the real problems that all citizens face.

These include:

- Creating family wage jobs outside the Seattle area, whose boom obscures struggling families in places like Spokane;
- Increasing the quality and availability of child care;
- Making sure every child and worker has health coverage; and
- Giving every student and citizen the chance to obtain a world-class education, be it at an elementary school, community college or state university.

Now that our statewide economy is booming, there's no better time to give these problems the attention they deserve. As of October 1997 our unemployment rate is at 4.1%, economic growth is solid, and our state budget will have a surplus of nearly \$900 million. Washington is blessed to have some of the finest employers in the world, cutting edge manufacturers, creative small businesses, and a workforce that is second to none.

The only problem with this picture is that it ignores how our economy is performing in all of Washington. The rapid growth of the Interstate Five corridor obscures the picture of the rest of the state, where good jobs are hard to find and too many families are struggling to pay their bills.

This is not to say that the economy outside of Western Washington is bleak. Unemployment in Spokane County is lower than the statewide average, inflation is low, and new commercial developments mark our economic hopes for tomorrow. Yet there are other factors to our economy that are disturbing:

- Wages are too low. Spokane County's median wage is almost \$10,000 a year lower than King County, with 45 percent of workers in Spokane County earning less than \$14,000 a year.
- Job creation is slow. The State Employment Security Department projects that there will be over 50,000 job openings per year between now and the year 2005 in King County, in Spokane County the number is under 7,000.
- Part-time work without basic benefits. Many of our jobs are part-time or come without crucial employment supports such as sick leave, child care or health insurance.

- Longer workweeks. Economists say that those blue collar workers who are seeing bigger paychecks are more likely working longer hours than getting raises. *The New York Times* notes that "fathers and mothers, sons and daughters are working longer hours for roughly the same hourly pay. It is not higher wages but extra time on the job that is the main source of the rising household income. That is a precarious affluence. When the economy weakens, as it inevitably will, the extra work can disappear abruptly."

What is often lost in the analysis of the new economy is its effect on our community. For those that are working longer hours just to stay in place, our other obligations — to family, church, and community — are often pushed aside by the need to work. For those without adequate earnings or needed job supports such as medical insurance and child care, economic insecurity can lead to problems in our family, church, and community life.

Boost the Role of Citizens

Being an informed citizen and voter takes time and effort, and we should make it easier for citizens to register to vote and get to the ballot box.

Automatic, immediate voter registration — such as when you renew your driver's license or vehicle tabs — would be a good start. More citizens would have the chance to vote if it were more convenient. In Texas and other states, citizens don't have to rush home on a Tuesday night after work and try to remember the location of their precinct polling place. Instead, voting booths open up on the weekend before the traditional Tuesday election day.

Citizens also deserve to have full access to government meetings and documents.

The solutions to many of our problems lie in building on our strengths. Our community has a strong civic infrastructure: COPS shops, PTA's, and neighborhood councils provide crucial social capital that make our community safer, better educated, and more responsive to neighborhood needs. Our workers and businesses provide the backbone to our economy known for its strong work ethic and commitment to quality production and service. The challenge is to enhance the great things happening in our new economy while minimizing the more disturbing trends. With this in mind, there are four proposals that policymakers should focus their attention on.

Step One: Fair wages — People need fair wages, especially workers just starting out, so they don't have to work two jobs to support a family.

The minimum wage should be raised to the same rate that it is in Oregon (\$6.50 per hour), rather than our current rate which is the lowest on the West Coast — currently it's \$5.15 an

hour, which is \$10,712 a year before taxes if you work five days a week, 52 weeks a year, with no vacations or time off. A boost to \$6.50 would bring a family of three above the poverty level for the first time since 1968.

No family can realistically live on the minimum wage, but more than 126,000 workers in Washington were making less than \$5.15 before the federal minimum wage was raised this September.

Step Two: Basic benefits — Everyone deserves sick leave, to take care of their children, loved ones and themselves, to see a doctor or, to take care of a medical emergency.

Fringe benefits should be available to all part-time and temporary workers on a *pro rata* basis. If a full-time, 40-hour-a-week worker receives, 40 hours of sick leave per year, then a part-time worker should receive similar leave based on the number of hours they work..

Step Three: Emergency and family leave — Life isn't neatly packaged into eight-hour days and 40-hour weeks. You can't predict when your son or daughter might injure themselves, your grandmother falls ill or a family member gets married. Family is important, and every worker should have the chance to make family a priority.

Emergency benefits should be provided for all workers. Six other states have added state money to the unemployment insurance fund. They give standard unemployment benefits to workers when they have to take time for a long-term emergency, such as a husband or wife falling victim to cancer. The state funds it — businesses don't have to pay anything, and workers can go back to their jobs after the emergency. Too many people try to work full-time during drastic family emergencies because there's no other way to pay the bills.

Step Four: Child care — Day care centers in Spokane are struggling to cope with a huge influx of children but lower state subsidies. That means child care centers are actually closing down even though more kids than ever are in need of care. Last year, Spokane saw two non-profit child care centers

shut down, one run by the YWCA and one by the Salvation Army. They closed because the subsidy the state provides to low-income parents who need child care is so low that centers often take such children at a loss.

According to a new federal study, even workers that care for animals get a better salary than those who care for young children, most of whom make about a dollar more than the minimum wage. It's a shame that the people that teach and care for our youngest children are our most poorly paid educators.

Child-care centers are usually small mom-and-pop businesses struggling to get by. Kathryn Curryer of Spokane, for example, has run a day care out of her home for 13 years. She and her husband work from 5 a.m. to midnight to keep the business going. Many day care centers in Spokane actually lose money on the low-income children they take because the state subsidy is so low. Child-care provider Danyll Van Lierop wrote my office to say, "On the occasions my husband and I require a babysitter, I pay a teenager more per hour than I receive myself."

That doesn't make sense. We shouldn't be bankrupting day care centers and putting the care of our youngest in jeopardy. Instead, we should make sure that our kids get the best care and education possible during their most formative years.

These four ideas aren't cure-alls or miracle prescriptions. Just a start.

But with much of our statewide economy in full bloom there is no better time to make sure that all of Washington's workers and families are getting a fair shake, whether they live in booming Seattle or in Spokane.

3rd District



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